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What is forest farming?

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Trees

Working



Photo: University of Vermont Center for Agricultural Sustainability

Shiitake mushrooms, a culinary speciality crop, are among the many crops that can be grown in the forest.

Forest Farming, or Multi-Story Cropping, is a distinctive approach to land management that combines management practices of conventional forestry with those of small-scale farming or gardening to attain an environmentally and economically sustainable land-use system.

Typically, a Forest Farming system is established by thinning an existing woodland or plantation to leave the best canopy trees for continued timber production and to create the appropriate conditions that favor the understory crop.

Although some woodland owners pursue Forest Farming as a source of income, many people

enjoy collecting or growing non-timber forest products as part of their cultural and family tradition, or as a recreational outing.

In Forest Farming, high-value specialty crops or special forest products are cultivated or grown under the protection of a managed forest canopy.

Crops like ginseng, shiitake mushrooms and decorative ferns are sold for medicinal, culinary or ornamental uses.

Forest Farming provides added income while the canopy trees are growing and developing into timber, veneer, and other solid wood products.

Crops from the forest

Fruit:

- pawpaw
- currants
- elderberry
- serviceberry
- blackberry
- huckleberry

Other food crops:

- ramps (wild leeks)
- syrups
- honey
- mushrooms
- other edible roots

Other products: (mulch, decoratives, crafts, dyes):

- pine straw
- willow twigs
- vines
- beargrass
- ferns
- pine cones
- moss

Native ornamentals:

- rhododendron
- forsythia
- flowering dogwood

Medicinal herbs:

- ginseng
- black cohosh
- goldenseal
- bloodroot
- Pacific yew
- mayapple
- saw palmetto

Nuts:

- black walnut
- hazelnut
- hickory
- beechnut

Considerations for forest farming

Development: A successful Forest Farming system should be guided by a forest management plan that includes the land-owner's objectives, a resource inventory, a market analysis and a business plan.

Markets: As with any crop, marketing specialty forest products can be difficult without knowing how the current market system operates. In many cases, the existing markets are not well-organized or publicized. As a result, there typically aren't directories of buyers. In some states, the university cooperative extension service, state agriculture department, or state forestry agency maintains a list of forest specialty product buyers. Marketing lists may also be available on-line. A good way to get started growing and selling special forest products is to talk to someone who can be trusted and works in the industry.

Start-up costs: The costs of producing non-timber forest products in a Forest Farming system can be vary dramatically. Maple syrup or woods cultivated ginseng production may need an investment of several hundred dollars or more to purchase

the necessary equipment and get started. On the other hand, craft materials, leeks, native fruits and nuts that are already growing on a site may not require any out-of-pocket costs other than containers to gather the products while harvesting.

Selling: Since markets for Forest Farming products are often not well established, landowners may need to take a very active role in selling their items. Options for selling include farmers' markets, internet sales, agri-tourism, on-farm direct sales, pick-your-own, mail order, direct delivery, cooperatives and direct marketing associations.

Regulations: The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) regulates international trade of certain plant and animal species in order to eliminate detrimental impacts on their survival. In order to be legally exported, regulated plants must be harvested and records kept according to CITES rules and restrictions. Many states also have harvesting regulations for certain native plants.



Photos: L-R, Anika Salsera, 123rf.com; David Stephens, Bugwood; H.J. Larsen, Bugwood; Chris Schnepf, Bugwood; Paul Wray, Bugwood

Among the many crops and products grown in the forest are maple syrup (syrups and honey), black cohosh (herbs), black cap morels (mushrooms), beargrass (decorative plants) and hazelnuts (edible nuts).

More information on the Web

USDA National Agroforestry Center <http://www.unl.edu/nac/forestfarming.htm>
 The Center for Agroforestry <http://www.centerforagroforestry.org/practices/ff.php>
 Association for Temperate Agroforestry http://www.aftaweb.org/forest_farming.php
 Non-timber Forest Products <http://www.sfp.forprod.vt.edu>
 Non-timber Forest Products Information Exchange <http://www.ifcae.org/ntfp>



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